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ABSTRACT

The diminishing role of the federal government in rural development has created an opportunity for new initiatives in this area. One potentially useful response is the creation of a state-rural policy center. Such centers can combine the efforts of land grant institutions, extension services, and state universities in the development and evaluation of rural policy issues and responses to the many changes occurring in the rural sector. Rural economic development efforts are needed that promote local government capacity building and attract business and industry to rural areas. Regional approaches, circuit riding professionals, cooperatives for production and marketing, and telecommunications technologies are some of the options that promote rural development and link the rural sector and economy with the larger urban sector and global economy. Based on these issues and changes, several broad areas need focused attention and study in order to enhance the prospect of rural development: rural people and communities, economic development, local government finance, community services, natural resources and environment, rural values and social change, and educational outreach in rural areas. The rural development needs of Pennsylvania (the state with the largest rural population in the nation) and recent efforts in that and other Northeast states are cited. (NEC)

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State Rural Policy Initiatives: Their Time Has Come

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[1] Pennsylvania Rural Coalition and Pennsylvania House of Representatives Appropriations Committee, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Resource Economics and Community Development, University of New Hampshire, Durham.

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State Rural Policy Initiatives: Their Time Has Come

ABSTRACT

The diminishing role of the federal government in rural development has created an opportunity for new initiatives in this area. One potentially useful response is the creation of a state-rural policy center. A discussion of the role and place of such a center, and the identification of seven policy program areas is presented. Possible implications of the development of such an initiative are advanced.

Background and Rationale

Over the past seven years support for rural development activities at land grant universities has declined. In particular, funding for research and extension service activities has been declining, placing fiscal constraints on important activities for studying and addressing needs in the rural sector.[2] Numerous positions in rural development research and extension at land grant universities have been frozen or eliminated (Luloff, 1986; Heasley, 1981). As a result, the national rural development effort has been slowed.

Such constraints could not have occurred at a more inopportune time, especially since the groundwork for activity in rural development received significant impetus in the early 1970's. Beginning with the 1972 Rural Development Act, attention was shifted to the nations small and rural towns. This act was one of the first to couple research and extension activities in rural development. In 1979 the Carter Administration created a rural develpment action agenda which attempted to provide an explicit rationale for federal intervention (based on poverty, smallness of scale, and low density) (Carter Administration, 1979). The Carter policies sought to overcome problems of isolation, to promote economic development, to meet basic human needs, to protect the quality of rural life, and to build intergovernmental and public/private partnerships to meet local needs and priorities. A central part of this program was the involvement of local people themselves in setting the policy.

[2] Pennsylvania and New Hampshire numbers here are used solely as an example.

USDA Appropriations to Pennsylvania and New Hampshire Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, 1977-1987

Fiscal Year	Extension		Research	
	PA	NH	PA	NH
1978	7,819,836	1,049,911	4,006,897	1,047,556
1979	8,229,864	1,122,329	4,216,996	1,050,575
1980	8,953,96	1,180,665	4,588,025	1,103,376
1981	9,728,444	1,272,313	4,984,872	1,206,489
1982	10,158,205	1,399,420	5,205,082	1,300,582
1983	10,342,402	1,475,788	5,299,465	1,363,748
1984	10,542,511	1,496,689	5,402,001	1,380,705
1985	10,065,226	1,600,352	5,084,121	1,407,817
1986	10,065,226	1,479,985	5,084,121	1,341,424
1987	10,065,226	1,479,985	5,084,121	1,341,424

Source: Pennsylvania information from Kenneth E. Martin
NH information from Jim Grady, CES, and Jim Stewart, AES.

Things changed with the Reagan administration. First, the 1980 Rural Policy Act contained no new rural development authorizations and thus was, at best, a symbolic/pyrrich victory in that the nation now had a rural and urban policy and a designated lead Federal office to oversee rural development. In 1983, the Office of Rural Development Policy recommended an increased use of federal resources to attack rural poverty and improve inadequate services in rural areas. The program was entitled "Better Country: A Strategy for Rural Development in the 1980's" (Block, 1983).

A year later, in 1984, the Office of Rural Development Policy issued a new report entitled "Rural Communities and the Family Farm: A Partnership for Progress" (Office of Rural Development Policy, 1984). This program confirmed a commitment to rural community development and promoted a partnership between farm and nonfarm interests in rural development efforts. Between these programs, however, one major change in policy had occurred. Whereas the 1983 statement recommended an increased use of federal resources to attack poverty and improve services, the 1984 report encouraged rural communities to define their problems and solve them through local efforts and local resources. This switch in focus was underscored by the elimination of the office of Rural Development Policy as part of the Reagan administrations budget cutting efforts. Thus, the Reagan administration's rural development policy can be viewed as little more than an extension of the new federalism.

Despite the failure of the latest administration to develop and initiate an integrated approach to rural economic development problem solving, their policies helped to identify areas of need and opportunity. Regardless of whether funding returns to previous levels or are maintained at present rates, individual states must take a closer look at their own rural development needs and efforts. It is no longer enough to promote rural development policies and programs that are general and do not capitalize on the numerous interdependent relationships characteristic of the rural sector. It is simply an error to view rural America as a homogenous mass. Rural, in some states, will mean a focus on efforts in agriculture and its concomitant pressures on farm families and local economies, while other states might fix on timber dependent, mining, fishing, or manufacturing predominated communities and their attendant problems. Every state will need to consider rural development initiatives which assist families currently engaged in extractive pursuits into other industries with better employment opportunities.

Many states will need to develop programs designed to focus on problems confronting large, nonfarm rural populations. Such states must develop unique rural policies which target their own range of rural problems and needs. If moves are made to replace federal programs and funding, new state level efforts might need to be developed. Such efforts will certainly need to be coordinated so that they can effectively and efficiently meet locally determined priorities which are consistent with a comprehensive, statewide, rural development strategy.

In Pennsylvania, for instance, there is no identifiable state rural development effort even though the state has the largest rural population in the nation, and agriculture is its largest industry (Martin, 1986). The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is marked on the one hand with higher levels of poverty, unemployment, and socioeconomic distress in rural areas, and lower intergovernmental expenditures per capita and lower education levels in rural areas. If the state is to experience fuller employment and economic growth, such disparities will need to be eliminated.

Perhaps as a result of this recognition and as increasing concern over issues confronting the nations small communities, rural has become a respectable adjective for politicians, associations, and organizations at all levels of government. More interest is developing in research needs and priorities as a result of an increased awareness of changes occurring in rural areas and the direction of those changes. New York State began such an effort in 1982 when it created the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources. It took three years of hearing and testimony on a wide range of rural issues to study rural problems and identify possible solutions. These concerns are now being addressed through legislative initiatives. The Northeast also has programs in Vermont, Massachusetts, and most recently Pennsylvania.[3]

[3] One such effort, The Center for Rural Pennsylvania, was recently created (June, 1987) through legislative action by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. For further details contact the authors.

The changing character of the rural population and the rural economic base make these areas more complex and diverse than before. Agriculture and rural are no longer synonymous although there is a growing recognition of the interdependence that exists between agriculture and other aspects of the rural economy (Wimberley, 1987). These changes are occurring at a time when there has been decreased availability of federal revenues. The loss of certain categorical and block grants, and the decline in importance of a national rural agenda, has created additional burdens on small and rural communities. The changing rural population is in need of the same government services as their urban counterparts but the particular needs of the rural sector have largely been ignored by state and federal policy makers. With new residents and different demographic profiles, local municipalities are facing increased demands for new and/or expanded governmental services. Retirement age populations are growing in number and many are located in rural areas. Industry and employment opportunities are bringing more people to rural areas and placing new and additional demands on the provision of all types of services. The growth of communities in the exurban periphery has highlighted the need for better mass transit systems. Infrastructure needs in rural areas range from roads and bridges that were never built for today's needs to insufficient maintenance funds to keep them in repair.

Decreased revenues have had an impact on rural education systems at a time when demands are focusing on increased curriculum offerings. Rural school districts are being called on to provide the same services, continuing education, and training found in urban districts, despite lower per pupil expenditures and lower income levels than their

urban counterparts. The rural labor force needs opportunities for training in new skills. Health care and human service demands are increasing in rural areas as the result of a changing population that is becoming more aware and willing to benefit from these services. Despite the glut of professional health specialists in urban areas, many rural areas remain undeserved and face the constant threat of the discontinuation of programs which provide rural areas with medical professionals and human service providers.

Rural economic development efforts are needed that promote local government capacity building and attract business and industry to rural areas. Regional approaches, circuit riding professionals, cooperatives for production and marketing, and telecommunications technologies are just some of the options that promote rural development and link the rural sector and economy with the larger urban sector and global economy.

Based on these issues and changes, several broad areas need focused attention and study in order to enhance the prospect of rural development. These include: rural people and communities, economic development, local government finance, community services, natural resources and environment, rural values and social change, and educational outreach in rural areas.

Policy Program Areas

Rural People and Communities

An essential ingredient of rural public policy initiatives is an appropriate base of knowledge and information about rural conditions and needs. Often various universities and state agencies have

knowledge and information on rural communities and residents. However, the task of bringing these varied collections of experts and data together has not been achieved in a central location. Thus many states have a need for developing, maintaining and using a statewide data base. Such an informational data base should include data on local government finances, community organizations and services, natural resources, population attributes, and industrialization. While information needs in these and other issue areas will emerge, evaluation is also needed to identify the policy significance of differences among rural places and to delineate the characteristics and trends which contribute to the constantly changing rural populations.

Economic Development

Information about economic development processes in rural areas is critically important to state initiatives in rural development. The level of economic activity in a community affects, both directly and indirectly, the employment and income in a community and the quality of life and well-being of its people. The construction and implementation of models to determine the interrelationships of key factors in the economic development process, the evaluation of federal, state and local policy instruments to affect economic activity at the community level, and the development and application of techniques for evaluating the distribution of costs and benefits of economic development for people, communities, and governments are needed. In addition, attention needs to be focused on critical labor-management relationships and efforts that develop alternative strategies for community economic growth. These strategies include the development of local and regional cooperative organizations for production and

marketing, and employee ownership and share economies (Weitzman, 1985) which enhance the profitability of industrial conversions and new employment opportunities associated with the changing industrial sector. These alternative structures can help make up for the lack of capital availability in rural areas and result in more competitive industries in the rural sector.

Local Government Finance

Changing demographic trends and changes in intergovernmental relations have placed local units of government in fiscal difficulties. Local governments in many rural areas face mounting difficulties in trying to provide required matching funds for many state and federal programs as they search for increasingly scarce revenue resources. Local government finance alternatives, planning and growth management strategies, and the analysis of changes in local government revenue and expenditure patterns are important areas that need to be explored further.

Community Services

The provision of services in rural areas constitutes an ongoing and serious problem that impacts local government and private sector providers. Landfills are closing and incinerators, cogeneration and recycling facilities are beginning to replace the most common form of waste disposal. Rural areas do not have enough volume and most often are too scattered to benefit from these, largely urban, alternatives. The result, in terms of high tipping fees and transportation costs, is often prohibitively expensive. Most community services in rural areas face added costs simply because of dispersed populations scattered over large geographic areas with an inadequate revenue base to fund them.

Physical and mental health care services and facilities in such areas may need to be provided through alternative delivery systems. The rural sector has not benefitted from the range of specialized services and easy access to physicians available in urban areas. Many urban areas also provide a battery of other health services including rape crisis counseling and domestic violence and abuse services. Rural and small communities rarely provide such care and those fortunate enough to offer them regularly struggle with fiduciary matters. This uneveness raises important questions of equity with respect to the distribution of public funds. Finally, rural communities have tremendous needs for improved water and sewer systems as many of those which exist are badly deteriorated or do not meet current regulations. This is one area, in particular, where data and inventories would be useful in creating intergovernmental solutions to improving the management capacity of the rural infrastructure and developing alternatives to financing badly needed improvements (Cigler, 1987).

Natural Resources and Environment

Environmental quality and land use policy are among the leading natural resource issues facing rural communities today. The identification, clean-up, transfer and disposal of hazardous waste and the shift from landfills to alternate technologies for solid waste disposal pose new challenges for rural communities. The selection, siting and development of new or expanded water systems and waste water treatment facilities are critical to maintaining a healthy and attractive rural environment. These issues present significant opportunities and challenges for research and service projects. Natural resource issues offer excellent opportunities for social and

physical scientists to work together, with local and state policy makers in the resolution of emerging problems.

Rural Values and Social Change

Economic and demographic trends in non-metropolitan counties suggest that progress is being made in improving the life of rural people, but new problems of coping with change are emerging in many small towns and rural areas. One possibility is that growth disrupts traditional values and social institutions and another is that growth increases the viability of rural communities. Information is needed to delineate the conditions under which various social consequences of change might occur. The topics of highest priority in this area include changing values and social organization, leadership and conflict resolution.

Educational Outreach

Rural school districts are facing increased difficulties in matching revenues with expenditures. Alternative strategies for providing education in rural communities need to be evaluated. Rural models for providing adequate curricula and services need to be explored. The potential for the use of new technologies like telecommunications to supplement the programs of smaller rural schools need to be considered. Similarly, higher education opportunities need to be expanded and made more accessible for rural students.

Implications

Statewide efforts in the policy areas outlined above will be important in helping to identify and understand the issues facing rural communities. As research into rural issues and policies grows,

additional information on rural problem areas and needs will be uncovered. The unique problems associated with sparse populations scattered over large areas generally require different solutions than those usually employed in urban areas. Such circumstances require policy initiatives which address rural problems and needs covering a wide range of issue areas. The various states have numerous opportunities to coordinate and integrate efforts addressing the unique needs, conditions, and strengths of their rural people and places.

The public perception of rural areas has been inaccurate and rural problems have been largely misunderstood. Geographic isolation and distance have inhibited rural people and communities from participation in many public programs and efforts which promote economic development, provide jobs, and enhance the quality of life. The rural voice has often gone unheard in state governments where, despite the importance and size of the rural sector, urban interests have dominated the political landscape. Despite this, the nation's rural areas possess an abundance of natural resources, which along with human and community resources, could provide numerous opportunities for economic revitalization (Summers, 1987). Innovative local responses and solutions for rural problems and needs can elevate the quality of rural life significantly. Such actions are possible if state government can focus on the uniqueness of the rural sector and coordinate an interdisciplinary approach which recognizes the emergent opportunities that the rural sector can provide.

The time is propitious for the creation of state rural centers, which focus on rural development issues and promote rural policies. Neither local governments nor universities have the breadth and depth

of resources necessary to have a significant impact on rural issues and rural policy development. However, by combining the talents and expertise of faculty from state university systems with those of land grant universities and regional rural development centers, a more cohesive effort to promote rural community development can be promulgated.

Through a concerted effort linking various university staff members and other rural development experts, state governments can bring focused attention on rural policy issues that have, until recently, been the domain of the federal government. States face the task of coordinating, conducting, and facilitating research and service programs in community resource development. If state government acts to focus on its rural sector, its programs will be more responsive to the individual needs of that state.

As states are being asked to fund the shortfalls in federal research and extension activities, land grant institutions are pressuring state legislatures to fill the funding shortfalls. This situation provides state governments an excellent opportunity to develop rural centers which can combine the efforts of the land grant institutions, extension services, and state universities in the development and evaluation of rural policy issues and responses to the many changes occurring in the rural sector. Rural community revitalization efforts must be tailored to the particular changes and emerging economic development opportunities which often develop by state and/or region. How well these efforts are done will ultimately determine the success of state rural policy initiatives and goals.

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